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AUTHOR	De Leonibus, Nancy; Thomson, Scott
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ABSTRACT

After examining some of the pros and cons of traditional grading, the demands colleges make on grading practices, and the responses of people interested in grading, a number of examples of operating alternative systems are given. The alternatives include a dual (pass/withdraw grading in some courses, traditional grading in others) system, a weighted system, a pass/fail system, and a system of written evaluations. (IRT)

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The Practitioner

A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Vol. III, No. 3 February 1977

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Alternative Grading Systems

To Grade or Not To Grade

> The question of grading alternatives, while appearing to be multiple choice, is really answered better by "yes" or "no." When all of the hot air is compressed from the controversy, the decision becomes one of using grades or not using them. There really is no middle ground, anything more than "no grade" is "grading."[1]

Most educators agree that grading is here to stay. The question, then, is not whether to grade but how to grade. Which criteria should be used? What reporting system does the best job? Which approach is the most fair, is adequately descriptive, and is reasonably efficient? Many school administrators today are seeking answers by exploring modifications to the usual approaches or by exploring some new paths. The search is on.

Profiling the Problem

Large numbers of teachers, parents, students, college officials, and school administrators express dissatisfaction with traditional reporting systems. Grade inflation is one problem. The issue arose at a recent Phi Beta Kappa meeting in Williamsburg, Virginia. The national secretary of that organization expressed the view that as far as colleges were concerned, "I think they (college administrators) will need a kick in the tail if they expect to make any concrete adjustment (to the grade inflation problem) by the end of this century."[2]

1. Harold E. Lewis, Jr., "Alternatives to Grades: A New Crusade," *Educational Forum*, May 1973, p. 487.
2. *Washington Star*, December 6, 1976, p. A9.

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The "grade glut," as it is often referred to, affects colleges as an outgrowth of student activism, egalitarianism, competition for admission to professional schools, and fear of decreased enrollments. However, it also occurs in high schools. Reported nationally last summer was the case of a class valedictorian with a straight A record from a large eastern high school who was refused admission to the college of his choice because of low College Board scores.

Another issue concerning traditional "ABC" systems is their ambiguity. Are grades meaningless? Or, do they have too many separate and distinct meanings? Grades can be symbols for such diverse qualities as effort, motivation, participation, quiz scores, homework, or research projects. They can represent test scores developed by a teacher, a department, or by a national test bureau.

Other limitations found in traditional grading systems can be cited. They tend to make students competitive and dependent. They may be dominated by the merely subjective assessments of teachers. Above all, they create preoccupation with "W'ad ja get?" in both parents and students.

Traditional approaches may also affect perceptions of self. Research in developmental psychology indicates that grading based on competition rather than mastery lowers the self-concept among those unable to achieve certain norms.

Increased sensitivity to the "sorting function" of traditional grading, with its implications for students coming from different racial and cultural backgrounds, has highlighted the need to modify grading systems to scuttle charges of "elitism" hurled at schools.

The growth of competency tests adds yet another dimension to the grading dilemma. Their adoption by nearly a dozen states as a requirement for the diploma significantly affects traditional approaches to grade reporting. New ways to measure and report student achievement are indicated by this development.

Above all, the variety of alternative programs now available to high school students, including those which involve community service and work experience, have made principals and teachers acutely aware of discrepancies between current school curricula and traditional grading practices.

Counterpoint to Change

Although complaints about grading are prolific—perhaps because complainers tend to be more vocal than those who like the comforts of tradition—many schools feel reluctant to initiate grading changes. The reasons for supporting tradition may be quite substantial:

1) College admission regulations often require rank-in-class and grade-point average. Alternatives to traditional grading, therefore, are impracticable.

2) Parents and students like the old system because it is familiar, efficient, and reinforces good achievement.

3) Teachers don't have time for complicated evaluation systems.

4) The traditional "ABC" transcript is transferable from school to school; it is common currency.

5) The traditional approach reflects the realities of the "outside" world. Society classifies everything from cabbages to colleges. Americans grade meat and movies as well as music contests and motorcars.

One principal recently described the failure of a new grading system in his school:

> In April, 1976, we were involved in alternatives on grading. In September, 1976, we were not. Anyone who thinks education does not change is obviously wrong.
>
> The alternative grading was originally an outgrowth of our optional learning environment. Instead of a reported grade, teachers sent a report card of written analysis. This caused considerable consternation with:
>
> a. Our guidance counselors, who needed a grade for ranking,
> b. Some parents who insisted upon a grade,
> c. One teacher of our team who didn't understand the purpose of the alternative.
>
> At present, our optional program is no longer directed toward learning problems. Instead, it is comprised of a heterogeneous group of students, some of whom are very grade conscious. In order to accommodate these students, the written report has been dropped and we are back to traditional grading.

Facing Demands from Colleges

Some schools have managed to cope with college demands by maintaining traditional grades on student records while using teacher-written evaluations or some other alternative reporting system for students

and parents. In Pittsburgh's Saint Benedict Academy, Sister Kathleen Mack, O.S.B., principal, reports that even though a new plan for written evaluation was successfully adopted in her school:

> Grades were reluctantly kept because of the demands of most colleges and many employees for an "objective" letter grade to designate a student's academic progress. We look upon this "grade" as a token, not a priority.

On the other hand, colleges may be more flexible than imagined. Dominican High School in Detroit reports that only one university refused admission to one student during the past five years during which Dominican recorded neither the G.P.A. nor the R.I.C.

A study by Canosa and Killeen[3] showed that 71 percent of the colleges surveyed felt that class rank should not be omitted from the high school transcript. Only seven percent, however, indicated that such an omission would be unacceptable under any circumstance. Comparison by exact numerical rank is preferred by the reporting colleges to one by percentile rank. Generally, the large state universities place a high value on class rank as a central element in their admissions formulae. Smaller colleges and universities usually are less insistent about requiring class rank.

On balance, however, higher education must be viewed as a force for the retention of traditional grading systems. To the extent that high schools modify the "usual" approach to grade reporting, then the more likely are college admissions officials to rely upon scores from standardized tests. One way or another, students are graded.

Facing the People Problem

Schools desiring to modify traditional grading practices must focus on the process by which alternatives are initiated and selected, not on identifying a particular alternative.

Good examples of preparation for change and involvement of those affected are illustrated by the approaches taken by Ossining High School and St. Benedict Academy.

In Ossining, N.Y., a change in grading occurred after a committee, comprised of representatives from every department, recommended that an optional pass/withdraw system be offered to students, allowing them the prerogative of selecting the new grading system or retaining the traditional system in each course.

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3. Robert Canosa and Gerald A. Killeen, "What Data Colleges Prefer from Secondary Schools," *NASSP Bulletin*, October 1976, p. 32.

Recommended also by the committee was that only those teachers wishing to offer the pass/withdraw system should do so and that no pressure should be exerted on those teachers who preferred not to offer it.

Parents were prepared for the change by a summary of the grading committee's report, which was sent to them along with the student's yearly schedule in late August. Further explanation was included in school publications. Parents were also asked to give written approval for the option, which requires that a written progress report be sent out by the teacher at report card time or at five-week intervals.

Counselors are given a list of students who choose the pass/withdraw system, and evaluation reports are kept on file so that both parents and colleges have access to student progress. Continuous evaluation is occurring along with a series of workshops on individual grading techniques where individual teachers can share already tested and individually successful modes of grading.

In another instance, Sister Kathleen Mack, principal of Saint Benedict Academy in Pittsburgh, initiated a self-study of her school's total program, which led to an alternative grading system.

Separate faculty committees were formed to discuss goals and needs. One of the foremost concerns was the effectiveness of the grading system. One department was given permission to use written evaluation forms in place of the regular report card. Other departments gradually used the same method.

Following a study into the problems of grading, an In-Service Day was held. In her words:

> An In-Service Day in January was organized with the presentation of several methods of grading or student evaluation used in neighboring high schools. A report from several other high schools to whom we wrote gave us additional information. Following this In-Service, we had several more lengthy faculty meetings in which we probed, discussed, argued, and finally came to a decision. Students were also canvassed since most of them through the Social Studies Department, the Religion Department, and the Business Department were acquainted with a written form of evaluation.

A new system was adopted at the Academy. It is described later in this report.

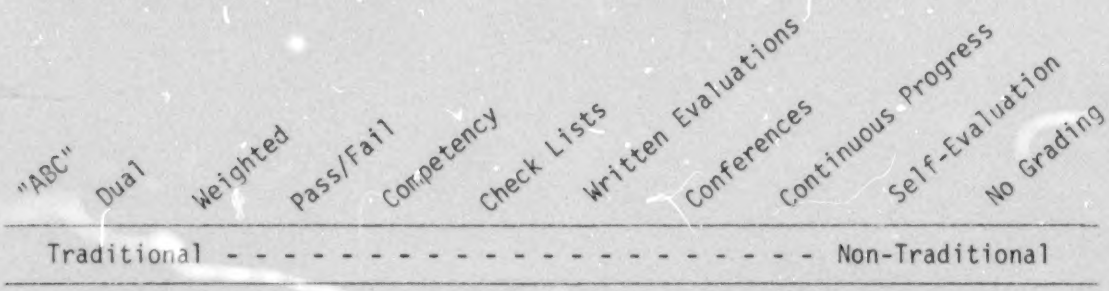
While the situation at a particular school may call for different approaches to implementation, it is essential to remember two things:

Plan carefully for any grading changes.

Involve all persons affected by proposed grading changes.

Laying Out Options

One way to weigh the arguments for and against traditional grading practices is to lay out the available options. What are the alternatives, how do they relate to one another, and what does each purport to measure? The grading alternatives currently in use can be viewed as follows:



Two or three approaches, of course, may be used concurrently. For instance, a school may use the "ABC" system together with conferencing. Another school may evaluate students in some subjects on competency or performance tests, and use a weighted system for yet other subjects.

Viewed generally, the "non-traditional" arm of the scale tends to focus upon individual rates of progress and affective criteria, while the "traditional" alternatives tend to be cognitive and normative. Yet, these opposites also may be blended. For instance, competency levels could be: (1) ranked "A" or "C" or "F", (2) ranked "pass" or "fail", (3) granted as a whole or partial unit of credit, (4) included as one part of course (or diploma) requirements.

The Criterion-Referenced "Movement"

Some educators are becoming increasingly interested in criterion-referenced tests as a way to evaluate individualized instruction. These tests require a certain standard of performance which serves as a minimum passing level. Thus, students compete against the required standard and not against one another for grades and/or credit. Competency tests, proficiency tests, and performance tests are examples of the criterion-referenced approach.

Driver education courses, typing courses, and industrial education often use criterion-referenced (performance) tests to evaluate students. With the advent of behavioral objectives its use has spread to other courses, especially mathematics, science, and reading. Here the measurement focuses upon the learning of an individual student at a particular point in time rather than upon his relative standing in the class. The learner's score is not dependent upon the scores of classmates. Rather,

the purpose of criterion-referenced testing is to identify those students who have attained a prescribed level of performance.

On a practical level this approach to testing tends to be most successful when applied to specific skills, whereas a norm-referenced approach is more easily adapted to the evaluation of complex concepts. Reporting systems pose a problem, as well. They vary considerably among schools using the criterion-referenced approach, complicating the life of transfer students, employers, and college admission officials.

Despite these drawbacks, performance testing is growing. For instance, competency tests in basic skills increasingly are becoming a requirement for the high school diploma. The full potential of criterion-referenced tests has yet to be examined. Its ultimate success may well hang upon three questions: (1) Can most of the students attain most of the objectives in a given course? (2) Will examination of a single criterion adequately evaluate the synthesis of several objectives? (3) Can a common reporting system be developed?

The Common Source

The grading alternatives used by schools are based upon either a norm-referenced or a criterion-referenced approach to testing. The more traditional grading systems usually rely upon norm referencing, while an "exit skills" or continuous progress approach is criterion referenced. Some grading alternatives use an eclectic, or combined approach. For instance, pass/fail may be based upon specific performance levels or upon the relative achievement of students in the class.

To Illustrate

DUAL SYSTEM

Ossining High School
Stanley Toll, Principal

29 South Highland Ave.
Ossining, N.Y. 10562

In Ossining, N.Y., a pass/withdraw grade instead of a letter grade in some courses has been implemented this year. The traditional grading system, letter grades, will continue to be available to all students in all courses. The new option as described by Principal Stanley Toll provides a pass/withdraw option in some courses. If a student's work at the end of the course does not fulfill minimum requirements, the student is withdrawn from the course and no grade or credit is recorded.

This new grading alternative is designed to serve a number of objectives:

It provides students with an opportunity to pursue an interest in a course outside of an area of excellence without fear of failure.

It provides students who already have experienced failure with an opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to learn in an environment free of failure.

No student will be permitted to choose the new grading plan without parental consent. The decision once made is binding for the duration of that particular course. Any course taken under the optional grading system will not be considered in the computation of class rank.

WEIGHTED SYSTEM

Joliet Township High School — 201 E. Jefferson St.
Leroy Leslie, Principal — Joliet, Ill. 60432

In Joliet, Ill., a two-dimensional, five-level grading system is used with courses assigned weightings according to their relative difficulty. The new system is based on the belief that a one-dimensional grading system cannot accurately convey achievement and various combinations of course difficulty, individual motivation, and student effort.

An assigned grade can receive a predetermined weight mirroring the intent of the class assignment. For example, Joliet's five-level system ranges from least difficulty (Category 1) assigned a .8 weighting to the most difficult (Category 5) assigned a 1.4 weighting.

Weighted Grade Equivalency Chart

Grade	Category one (.6)	Category two (.8)	Category three (1.)	Category four (1.2)	Category five (1.4)
A	2.4	3.2	4	4.8	5.6
B	1.8	2.4	3	3.6	4.2
C	1.2	1.6	2	2.4	2.8
D	.6	.8	1	1.2	1.4
F	0	0	0	0	0

Grades of A, B, C, D, and F are used to relate an individual's achievement of course objectives. This requires that each department identify measurable objectives for all courses and conduct inservice programs to bring about increased standardization of measurement criteria.

Course weightings are periodically reviewed and adjusted as necessary, and new courses are assigned weightings when approved for the curriculum.

Flexibility is permitted so that under special circumstances a student enrolled in a given class can do extra work and be graded at a higher weighting. Such options require counselor and department/teacher approval, and cover such contingencies as scheduling conflicts, etc.

PASS/FAIL

Doherty Memorial High School — 299 Highland St.
John P. Whalen, Principal — Worcester, Mass. 01602

In Doherty Memorial High School a program called SITE has been implemented. Students Involved with Their own Education is open to a total of

40 juniors and seniors who are selected through an essay and interview.

A blend of course and internship hours exists. Besides being involved in an internship at all times during the school year, SITE students take a minimum of three academic courses, which can include study at a local college or university.

For each internship the student must fill out a standard contract listing full details including expected duties. This contract must be approved by the student, the parents, the sponsor, and the coordinator. Students spend a minimum of five hours weekly on location of the internship to be eligible for one credit.

During the course of each internship, students keep a journal of experiences and confer regularly with the coordinator.

Every 10 weeks students submit to the coordinator a paper which includes a self-evaluation of progress and achievement and evidence of some outside reading in the field of the internship. The sponsor evaluates the student's achievement upon completion of the internship. Grading is on a pass/fail basis.

WRITTEN EVALUATIONS

Saint Benedict Academy — 4530 Perrysville Ave.
Sister Kathleen Mack, O.S.B., Principal — Pittsburgh, Pa. 15229

At St. Benedict Academy a system which stresses written student evaluations by each teacher has been implemented. Although letter grades have been maintained, they are de-emphasized.

Each teacher prepares a list of behavioral objectives or competencies for every course. The list, which is distributed to all students and parents, is the basis for the written evaluation.

This system makes it possible for students and parents to know precisely what the student is expected to accomplish in a given report period in any course of study on the student's schedule. At the end of the report period, the teachers consult the goals or competencies to evaluate a student's performance.

Values found in the new system include a reduction in stressful competition among students created by traditional grading systems, and for teachers it means more precision in assessing and reporting a student's progress and accomplishments. For parents, accurate and detailed information about what their children are and are not accomplishing in high school is provided.

Hissom Memorial Center School — Sand Springs, Okla. 74063
Lee Rand Smith, Principal

Principal Smith reports on the evaluation method in use at the Hissom Memorial Center School, a residential special education school serving 19 counties in northeast Oklahoma. He writes:

> We give no formal grades and we have no "grade level placement." The children progress on an individual basis and may be assigned to as many as five different groupings during a given day. Reports to parents are written subjective letters covering the child's progress, short-term goals, and long-range goals.

Of course, teachers submit a written monthly progress report to our office and also record monthly in the child's progress record in his cottage. Graduation is not based on "grades," but achievement in the areas of training, and actual successful on-the-job experience in the community. Driver training is an integral part of our program. A student not meeting the requirements for graduation receives a certificate of achievement in any area wherein he has distinguished himself.

COMPETENCY RATING

Dominican High School — 9740 McKinney
Daniel J. Hogan, Administrator — Detroit, Mich. 48224

At the end of each marking period at Dominican instead of receiving the traditional letter-graded report card, 153 students in an experimental program receive a progress report of competencies.

The ratings evaluate the basic competencies required for graduation to include writing, spelling, typing, reading comprehension, personal financial management, health, knowledge of the use and misuse of mass media, computational skills, and knowledge of government. Competency ratings are given for all elective courses, as well.

Dominican does not grant credit for courses. It believes that "a competency equals credit but that a credit does not equal competency." The competency ratings provide an accurate record of actual achievement.

The school year is divided into five sessions of seven weeks each. Some courses are intensive.

Jeannette Middle School — P.O. Box 418
Richard P. Davis, Principal — Jeannette, Pa. 15644

At Jeannette, teachers identify exit skills for students in each course and design evaluation instruments to determine whether or not the desired skills have been achieved. Tests are given in September for diagnostic purposes, and again in April to test competency levels. Students lacking the exit skills are then remediated during May and June. One benefit of this approach, according to Principal Davis, is an improved focus by teachers on reaching instructional objectives with students.

CONTINUOUS PROGRESS WITH CRITICAL PATH

Mariner Senior High School — 200-120th St., S.W.
Clifford Gillies, Principal — Everett, Wash. 98201

Continuous progress evaluation systems usually employ competency tests. As students progress through the course, they master the competency levels required, step by step. Mariner High School grants units of credit according to the number of levels achieved. For example, a student may earn one-half unit of credit for completing 10 levels in a course, one unit for completing 20 levels, and one and one-half units for completing 30 levels. Students at Mariner also may earn "quality" credits for exceptionally good work. Depending upon the number of quality credits earned, a student may qualify for honors recognition.

A "critical path" method of course construction is also used. Each level for a course is developed in sequential order with certain levels being defined as critical to completion of the course. This is accomplished by determining which levels are prerequisite for understanding the levels to follow. This results in a critical path plus a number of enrichment paths for students.

Among the benefits of the critical path method, according to Principal Cliff Gillies, are:

(1) Careful identification of what really is prerequisite.

(2) Establishment of sequences of learning.

(3) Development of continuous growth and enrichment possibilities for students.

(4) Development of an understandable and objective means of evaluating the progress of students without using grades.

PARENT CONFERENCES

St. Paul Open School
Wayne Jennings, Director

97 East Central Ave.
St. Paul, Minn. 55101

In the Saint Paul Open School, a demonstration project of the public school system, each student selects his own adviser from the staff. The adviser meets weekly with each student to help the student write goals and devise a program. He is the student's facilitator and acts as an "educational broker" by arranging learning experiences in and out of the school that achieve the student's goals.

The school reflects several changes in traditional practices—for example, integrated learning, community as classroom, cross-age grouping—and uses a non-graded approach. Report cards and grades have been replaced by four parent-student conferences held each year with the student's adviser.

The purpose of the conference is to provide a time to reflect on the student's educational progress and agree on modification of his program as needed. Students come to the conferences with samples of their work or folders from various areas of the school.

Among the conference questions used are these, according to Jennings:

1. What are the student's goals? Should they be changed? If there is not a list of goals, perhaps now is the time to write some or to set a time for this important task.

2. What is especially successful in the student's program? What needs to be altered? Each party should answer on how they see it—parent, student, adviser. Where does the student spend most of his time; what areas need more exploring?

3. How well is the agreement originally discussed in the fall going regarding each party's responsibilities and expectations including: communication, attendance check-in, absences, parent contribution to the school (committees, advisory council, volunteering, projects, collections, contributions, etc.), adviser-advisee meetings, schedules, record keeping, amount of unscheduled time, field trips, leaving the building, etc.

4. What examples of student learning exist in the home (e.g., discussions, trips, use of public library, watching TV news, newspapers, magazine subscriptions, hobbies, friends and family activities)?

SELF-EVALUATION

Middle College High School
Carol M. Poteat, Principal

31-11 Thomson Ave.
Long Island City, N.Y. 11101

A system of student self-evaluation has been implemented in Middle College High School. Teachers and students together set performance objectives at the beginning of the term. Individual contracts are drawn up where possible.

The student decides on his own grade which he must substantiate at the end of the term with his teacher. Both must agree on a grade before it is recorded. When an impasse is reached the counselor is the arbitrator. If no agreement is reached after a considerable time, the case can be settled by binding arbitration. (Parents and other students as well as counselors can be a part of the arbitration process.)

Poteat cautions that the process is very time consuming for teachers who must meet individually with every student. Also, students must have time to write out each evaluation sheet.

This *Practitioner* was developed by Nancy De Leonibus, research associate, and Scott Thomson, associate secretary for research of NASSP.

The illustrations used in this report came from schools responding to NASSP's annual questionnaire on exemplary programs. Appreciation is extended to these schools for their cooperation.

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